



## The status of Pel's Fishing Owl *Scotopelia peli* in the Togo–Bénin Gap

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Cheke & Walsh<sup>1</sup> state that Pel's Fishing Owl *Scotopelia peli* is probably extinct in Togo, noting a lack of records, despite the authors' extensive helicopter flights throughout the Togolese river systems during 1979–1990. The only known record of the species in Togo dates from 1902 at 09°12'N 01°25'E<sup>9</sup>.

The species has, however, been observed in the Pendjari and Arli National Parks, in neighbouring Bénin and Burkina Faso, where it is described as rare in riparian habitat, presumably along the Pendjari River<sup>6</sup>. It is resident on several river systems in Park W, Niger, which also encompasses part of northern Bénin, and a pair was regularly noted along the Mekrou River, which forms the border between Niger and Bénin<sup>7</sup>. It was also recorded during the 1996 African Waterfowl Census, in southern Bénin<sup>2</sup>, although it appears that these observations may be doubtful. It is now thought that Pel's Fishing Owl was probably being confused with African Marsh Owl *Asio capensis* and it is expected that this error will shortly be corrected in print. Pel's Fishing Owl is an uncommon resident in Nigeria, with a small number of breeding records<sup>4</sup>, and a resident in Ghana<sup>3</sup>.

The author recently attempted to establish whether the species was present in gallery forest along the Ouémé River in central Bénin. The habitat along the river, which is largely undisturbed, had been covered during onchocerciasis research (in which Cheke and Walsh participated) but appeared particularly suitable. There is dense gallery forest along the river, both north and south of Bétérou (09°19'N 02°16'E) and the river flows through the Forêt Classée of the Ouémé Supérieur to the north of the town and the largely unpopulated Forêts Classées of Ouari Maro and Monts Kouffés to the south. The river has many large permanent pools and apparently sufficient fish stocks to support the fishing owl. Gibbon's recording<sup>5</sup> was memorised but several evenings in early April 1997 were spent in this area without success. Then, at dusk

on 12 April 1997, as I was leaving the river after a swim, the unmistakeable call was heard: a very deep, soft sonorous horn-like boom, first on a single note, followed by a continuous higher-pitched *bu-bu-bu*. This lasted some minutes before the bird fell silent, but the performance was repeated the next evening at exactly the same time, and for the same short duration. Although the surrounding gallery forest was searched on 13 April, I was unable to locate the bird. Local Gambari fisherman have since confirmed that they have seen the species on the river relatively frequently.

The only possible confusion species, due to size, habitat and, to a certain extent, voice is Giant Eagle Owl *Bubo lacteus*, which I have also observed in Bénin. However, the voice of the latter is quite different, there was no 'gruff' quality to the vocalisations heard at the Ouémé River, which corresponded perfectly with the recording by Gibbon<sup>5</sup> and the description of Maclean<sup>8</sup>.

From this observation, it may be surmised that the species may still be extant in Togo; given that Cheke & Walsh's<sup>1</sup> observations made after arrival in a helicopter can scarcely have been favourable for encountering a largely nocturnal species which is unlikely to be flushed by such means. ☺

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## The immature plumage of Sun Lark *Galerida modesta*

Volker Salewski

**D**uring a stay in Comoé National Park, Côte d'Ivoire in January 1995, a lark was observed and photographed in a recently burnt area of savannah. The identification of this bird caused some problems. Four lark species have been recorded in the park: Flappet Lark *Mirafra rufocinnamomea*<sup>2</sup>, Dusky Lark *Pinarocorys nigricans*<sup>2</sup>, Sun Lark *Galerida modesta*<sup>2</sup> and Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark *Eremopteryx leucotis*<sup>6</sup>. It was clear that the bird was not Dusky Lark or the sparrow-lark. From the photograph it was identified as a Sun Lark (presumably, on distributional grounds, of the nominate subspecies<sup>4</sup>), due to its prominent supercilium and black stripe between the bill and eye. The superficially similar Flappet Lark in the area, *M. r. buckleyi*, lacks a dark stripe between the bill and eye, whilst the illustration of this species in Keith *et al.*<sup>1</sup> shows only a faint supercilium which is described as 'poorly marked'. Identification problems were caused by the broad whitish tips to the wing coverts which formed two distinct wing bars in the bird observed in Comoé, although this feature is not illustrated in Keith *et al.*<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, the text in this work states 'scapulars and upper wing coverts...tipped whitish'. In the description of the field characters, this feature is not mentioned<sup>1</sup>. This implies that the whitish tips are not usually very obvious, unlike those on the bird in the photograph. Another feature which is not described in the text or shown in the illustration<sup>1</sup> are the whitish tips to the feathers on the back, head and ear coverts. Such features are however described for immature birds of the similar Flappet Lark<sup>1</sup>. The plumage of immature Sun Lark is apparently undescribed<sup>1,4,7</sup>, although Jones<sup>3</sup> mentions finding a recently fledged juvenile in The Gambia, she does not describe the plumage. Mackworth-Praed & Grant<sup>5</sup> in their text description of Sun Lark state that 'the young bird has white spots on the tips of the



Sun Lark *Galerida modesta* (Volker Salewski)

feathers of the upperparts'. This, and the fact that immatures of some other larks, eg Flappet Lark, show this white spotting leads to the conclusion that the bird photographed is an immature Sun Lark. ☞

### References

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